Special Issue: Theoretical Perspectives on Organizations and Organizing in a Post-Growth Era

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Theoretical perspectives on organizations and organizing in a post-growth era

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Abstract

The fundamental assumption we base this Special Issue on is that narrow concepts of growth have become the ruling ideas of this age, entrenched both in everyday life and to a considerable extent in the theoretical thinking and traditions of research conducted by organization and management studies scholars. We explain how tacit (or overt) endorsement of unbridled economic growth (the growth imperative) has pernicious practical effects and how it tends to restrict the intellectual base of the field. We argue that notions of degrowth present scholars with challenges as well as opportunities to reframe core assumptions and develop new directions in theory and research. Envisioning a post-COVID 19 world where societies and organizations can flourish without growth is one of the most difficult tasks facing theorists. We approach this challenge first by discussing the hegemonic properties of growth ideology and second by sketching an alternative political economy as a context for reimagining social and economic relations within planetary capacities in a post-growth era. Drawing on degrowth literature in ecological economics, sociology and

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political ecology, we identify key principles relevant to processes of organizing for a more just and environmentally sustainable future: frugal abundance, conviviality, care, and open relocalization. We conclude by introducing the three articles we feature in this issue along with some thoughts about theorizing policy and regulatory changes needed to generate transformational change and a future research agenda.

Keywords
Critical management studies, environmentalism, degrowth, green growth, growth critique, hegemony, political economy, post-growth, steady state economy

> *'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced'.*
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> *James Baldwin (1962)*

Introduction

Consider this: the first 4 months of 2020 saw greenhouse gas emissions fall by more than one billion tons compared with the same period in 2019. If this downward trend continues, annual emissions in 2020 are expected to decline by 8%, the largest decrease ever recorded (Tollefson, 2020). The scale of the reduction is what is required to meet the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement which seeks to limit global warming to 1.5°C to 2°C above preindustrial levels, something that was considered unachievable at the end of 2019 despite declarations of a "climate emergency" by many countries. There have also been dramatic shifts in government policies, corporate strategies, and societal behavior. For example, austerity governments like the United Kingdom's are spending trillions of dollars on healthcare, welfare, social security systems and housing for the homeless involving mobilization and redistribution of money at never before seen levels. Community support groups have mushroomed all over the world, prosocial behavior is on the rise, and some major corporations are increasingly focusing on delivering social value. Even the focus of politics appears to be slowly shifting toward collective wellbeing instead of individual interests.

These unprecedented changes did not result from any dramatic global climate policies but were forced upon the world by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than a million people worldwide as of October 2020. The global economy is in freefall, millions of people have lost their jobs, livelihoods have been undermined, primary healthcare in most countries is in critical condition and mental health and domestic abuse are at crisis levels. The pandemic has also exposed stark social inequalities, injustices and the brutal reality faced by "essential workers" who have become expendable workers to keep the economy afloat. Both the lockdown and the maintenance of essential services during the lockdown have adversely affected the poor, people of color and other marginalized groups whose rates of death are disproportionately high because the burden of keeping the economy going during the pandemic falls unduly on them (Reeves, 2020).

Climate change exposes and exacerbates similar inequalities: those that have contributed the least to the problem are already suffering and dying in disproportionately high numbers. While climate change did not cause the pandemic, human activity is responsible in both cases: our fossil fuelled economies of production and consumption have led to the climate emergency including habitat and biodiversity loss that created the conditions for spreading diseases by reducing the natural barriers between humans and virus carrying animals (Vidal, 2020). Both COVID-19 and climate emergencies are not unfortunate accidents but a result of conscious decisions humans have taken.

The climate emergency calls for government action at a similar scale and speed that is being deployed to deal with the pandemic. However, despite global efforts to combat climate change, global emissions of greenhouse gases have risen by 67% since 1990 (Boden et al., 2017). According to a 2013 report by the influential Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) the planet will face a global average temperature increase of 3 to 5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, causing severe environmental, economic, political and social upheaval across the world (IPCC, 2013). The recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) report on biodiversity loss sponsored by the United Nations (see Díaz et al., 2019) poignantly underscores the urgent need for a sweeping transformation of the world's economic systems. Instead of rebuilding economies of the past, a post-pandemic world offers opportunities to restructure and decarbonize our economies while creating new and different jobs, organizations, and institutions. The world is waiting for the pandemic to pass so the economy can grow again and life can resume as normal. But what if normal was the problem in the first place? What if this hiatus in the global economy is permanent? What would that mean for the future of growth in organizing our economies? Can the pandemic crisis allow us to imagine radical transformations that are not contingent on a model of endless economic growth and that can bring about a more just and regenerative world?

To the contrary, however, early indications after the relaxation of lockdowns in various parts of the world seem to reflect a desire to return to fossil-fuelled growth economies as global efforts to create a so-called green economy appear to be faltering. Government spending in response to COVID-19 is already more than three times larger than what was spent in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis but only 1% of the $11 trillion in stimulus money world-wide was dedicated to the "green economy" (IIF, 2020). It appears our political-economic frameworks and the worldviews that guide national and global decision-making are inappropriate for learning from past mistakes even as the current trajectory continues to pave the way to planetary devastation.

A conviction underlying this Special Issue is that changing course is possible only if we break our addiction to economic growth, "a drug that corrupts the reasonable and sensible pursuit of prosperity" (Gilding, 2011: 67). Perhaps in addition to focusing on what we should be doing to reduce carbon emissions or expanding renewable technologies a more reflective analysis of how and why we created the climate emergency might provide insights on what we should *not* be pursuing if we want to create a regenerative world. The mechanistic pursuit of economic growth, which is the fundamental basis of the global capitalist political economy, is largely responsible for the current state of the world—a state rife with concentrated wealth but increasingly impoverished in ecological integrity and social wellbeing (cf. Adloff, 2016). Broad-based questioning of the taken-for-granted assumption that our societies must be driven almost exclusively by economic growth is a good place to begin. Understanding the hegemonic formations of growth may enable different formulations of the most significant environmental and social problems facing humanity and point the way to a radically different set of solutions.

The hegemony of growth

This Special Issue is motivated by our perception that narrow concepts of growth have been canonized, often unwittingly, in everyday life and to a considerable extent by organization and management studies (OMS) scholars. We also see an urgent need for new critiques of growth that build on classic formulations (e.g. Daly, 1991) and contemporary theory building treatises (e.g. Kallis, 2018) to generate intellectual space for thinking differently about growth and organizations. In our view, the time is right for growth to be systematically examined and reflected upon by OMS scholars—particularly those who are interested in the broader political economic context within which organizations are produced and reproduced. We want to problematize taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie traditional notions of growth—that economic growth can be endless and without limits, that resource extraction can proceed without regard for resource depletion or ecological damage, and that economic growth enhances the social wellbeing of all. Our concern is similar to that expressed by Latouche (2009: 95) in his classic book, *Farewell to Growth*: that reasonable solutions to ecological crises and social problems begin with a trenchant “decolonization of the imaginary,” particularly the dominant modern social imaginary that presents accelerating economic growth as the source of all good. Such conventional ideas about economic growth achieve hegemonic power because organizational actors (and scholars who do not reflect on underlying paradigmatic assumptions) tend to reify growth, placing it in the natural order of things, prematurely foreclosing any debate about its actual merit, especially in relation to the roles organizations must play in creating spiraling material prosperity. This aggrandizing hegemony is far reaching, implying that growth can solve intractable societal problems like poverty and unemployment, that it creates abundance for all, and that there are no alternatives. Consequently, organizing strategies that produce economic growth tend to be embraced. In this way, growth becomes a driving force for capital accumulation creating multiple dependencies between business firms, investors, suppliers, workers, customers and states and even if there are competing interests between these groups, the pursuit of economic growth becomes both normalized and proposed as the answer to everything. Given this way of thinking, any dissenting views are cast as irrational—“deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries” (Jackson, 2009: 14).

Our primary concern is that hegemonic obsession with economic growth can lead to reductionist thinking across the board: naïve quantitative formulations of a healthy economy, one-dimensional notions of the good life, instrumental views of the purpose of the natural world and ultimately an uninhabitable planet for humans and countless other species. It can also limit challenges to excessive corporate power and influence while promoting a tacit endorsement of corporations as the primary engines of growth (see Korten, 2013). More boldly, we contend that unchecked economic growth is unequivocally unsustainable—economically, socially and ecologically—and also, as we discuss in a later section, that a new vocabulary is needed to imagine life in a post-growth era (D’Alisa et al., 2015). It was apparent decades ago that the thresholds of planetary capacities were being exceeded by business as usual practices (Foster et al., 1997) and this trajectory has only accelerated in subsequent years (Reichel and Seeberg, 2011; Stephen et al., 2018). Relatedly, critics have raised concerns about the collapse of civilizations as surprisingly fragile capitalist economic structures and social and political institutions shake under pressure from growing populations, resource extraction and scarcity, rampant consumerism, and climate change (Brown, 2003; Dahlman, 2012).

Despite these ominous trends, the assumption that rapid economic growth must be the imperative of the global political economic system is rarely questioned in mainstream economics (Daly, 2013) or OMS (Jermier, 1998; Klikauer, 2015; Newton, 2009). Growth forecasts are *de rigueur* both at the macroeconomic level and at industry and corporate levels. However, as Jackson (2009) points out, economics is ecologically illiterate. Key indicators of purported economic vitality such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) do not account for ecological destruction that inevitably accompanies economic growth. In fact, ecological crises like the massive British Petroleum oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico or widespread deforestation of the Amazonian rainforests increased GDP because that indicator simply calculates all monetary spending in an economy without distinguishing the negative ecological or social effects of economic activity. Even alternative measures like the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) that attempt to quantify environmental and social costs do not systematically question the primacy of growth. As Fournier (2008: 529) argues, it is the ideology of growth—“a system of representation that translates everything into a reified and autonomous economic reality inhabited by self-interested consumers"—that propels the growth machine and that is the fundamental problem. Degrowth[1] theorizing begins with a critique of this ideology.

An early attempt to understand the effects of unbridled growth was the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report in 1972. Using a series of computer simulations, the report concluded that given a business as usual scenario the physical limits to growth on earth would become evident during the twenty first century, leading to "sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity" (Meadows et al., 1972: 23). The research team argued that growth trends could be altered to achieve ecological and economic stability. Although initially discredited and the subject of heavy criticism, later studies appeared to validate many of the report's conclusions (Nørgård et al., 2010; Turner, 2008).

The primacy of economic growth is not challenged even in discourses of sustainable development or climate change (Banerjee, 2012). For instance, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed by the United Nations have "sustainable growth" GDP targets—SDG 8 for example aims to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" by pursuing a global GDP growth strategy of 3% per annum (Wiedmann et al., 2020). There appears to be little awareness about any possible contradiction between this goal and other goals like SDG 12 ("ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns") or SDG 13 ("take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts")—the prefix "sustainable" magically resolves any contradiction between economic growth and ecological well-being. Growth is also assumed to be required for urgent action to combat climate change according to the influential Stern report, *The Economics of Climate Change.* The report claims that the "world does not need to choose between averting climate change and promoting growth and development" and that "with strong, deliberate policy choices, it is possible to decarbonize both developed and developing economies on the scale required for climate stabilization, while maintaining economic growth in both" (Stern, 2006: xi).

Both grassroots movements and government actions are needed for any significant shifts from the conventional model of growth and trajectory of accelerated growth. There are currently no policies in place designed to reduce consumption or production. Instead, government action to reduce environmental impacts of economic growth have focused on cap and trade systems to reduce emissions, carbon taxes, and green investments. Proposed "degrowth friendly" policies include zero interest rates (although that is generally a policy to stimulate growth), progressive taxation, guaranteed basic income, worksharing, and a reduced work week (Kallis et al., 2012; Wiedmann et al., 2020). It is difficult to imagine how these policies can be implemented in capitalist economies on a voluntary basis without legislation. Other radical proponents of degrowth take an explicitly anti-capitalist position arguing that capitalism cannot exist without economic growth because capitalist economies can either grow or collapse but can never degrow voluntarily (Foster, 2011; Kallis et al., 2012). Consequently, a green capitalist economy based on illusory concepts of "green growth" is simply not possible (Spash, 2020). Alternate approaches include ecosocialism, which highlights the links between exploitation of labor and exploitation of nature and calls for a democratic socio-ecological transformation of the economy through public ownership of the means of production, or ecoanarchist approaches that aim to create local participatory forms of democracy without state hierarchies (Löwy, 2015).

In our view, it is apparent that complex ideological systems supporting unbridled economic growth have been hegemonic in most societies for centuries and increasingly difficult to supplant for decades. Even progressive discourses focused on sustainability and climate policy, areas of thinking most in need of imaginative re-envisioning, seem to be mired in status-quo reinforcing growth narratives. The shared beliefs constituting the dominant modern social imaginary (especially in Western societies) flow from a deep-seated, usually unspoken commitment to economic growth that captures the imaginations of individuals and shapes their social practices, groupings and societies. We characterize the dominant social imaginary with two factors that have had a powerful effect on the formation of modern societies: (1) the central place assigned to the economic in our private and public lives; and (2) the importance of rising standards of material prosperity for all. In contrast to growthmania, truly effective social imaginaries require "critical and creative thinking that simultaneously allows us to remain critical of what is (the present) and imaginative about what might be (the future)" (Johnsen et al., 2017: 2). A social imaginary as both a concept and practice reflects an enabling structure for the organization of society (Castoriadis, 1987: 3). It is what enables the practices of society and is both defined by and at the same time defines the moral order of society.

The potential of the degrowth project and post-growth alternatives is difficult to envision while conventional economic and organizational theories hold sway. To move beyond the false sense of security of the growth imperative, systematic critique that informs the relevant scholarly fields must lay the groundwork for a new social imaginary and new theorizing that initially de-centers and eventually reconceptualizes growth. We discuss these issues in the next section.

Towards post-growth social imaginaries: steady-state, green growth and degrowth

As environmental crises escalate, alternative social imaginaries that are viable require heightened ecological sensitivities to help frame action that can lead to the wellbeing of people and planet (cf. Perey, 2016). Both ecological economics and the academic field of organizations and the natural environment have enhanced the ecological imagination needed to formulate such post-growth social imaginaries. To illustrate, ecological economist Herman Daly asserted that economic growth that diminishes health and wellbeing is "uneconomic growth" (Daly, 2014: 19) because negative environmental and social costs of growth outweigh any economic benefits of high production. One strategy to address this problem that is likely to be unpopular among growth obsessed managers and policy makers is limiting growth, creating sufficiency and focusing on services (rather than products per se) to meet the needs of citizens. In this worldview less is more, small is beautiful and the economic ideal is that of a *steady state economy.* There are fewer products, less material throughput, the rate of extraction of renewable resources is lower than their regeneration, pollution outflows are within planetary boundaries, economic activities are lower in scale, and limits to population growth are in line with the limits of a finite planet (Daly, 1991). While a steady state economy recognizes that there are limits to growth it does not necessarily entail degrowth in the form of economic contraction.

Researchers, policy makers and business leaders have proposed ecoefficiency, sustainable development, and green growth as strategies to address the challenges of economic growth. More fuel-efficient cars, alternative engine technologies like hydrogen fuel cells or batteries, and carbon reduction technologies are examples of this strategy. The limits of eco-efficiency strategies, however, are all too apparent: gains from eco-efficiency are counterbalanced as a result of additional consumption. This rebound effect, known as the Jevon's Paradox, occurs because improved efficiency lowers the relative cost of using a resource, which in turn increases the quantity demanded (Demaria et al., 2013). For example, reducing the carbon emissions intensity of a particular manufacturing process may not lead to a reduction in total emissions if total consumption of the product or service increases as is likely in a growth dominated economy (Slawinski et al., 2017).

A more radical critique of growth is the notion of *décroissance* or *degrowth*, meaning economic contraction or downscaling based on reducing the energy and resource flows of an economy

(Kallis, 2018). Degrowth is not a particular theory as such but can be described as *mot obus*, a "word grenade" or "missile word" that aims to create new visions of social, ecological and economic transformations, "a political slogan with theoretical implications" (Latouche, 2009: 7). Degrowth challenges the institutions framing the economic, political and cultural dimensions of the modern social imaginary: capitalism and neoliberalism, arguing that these paradigms in their current forms have created the social-ecological crises we now face.

Degrowth is a "ruthless critique of the dogma of economic growth" (Kallis, 2018: 1) that questions the ongoing relevance of these institutions in their current form. For example, it challenges the assumptions of green growth and sustainable development and argues that it is not possible to decouple economic growth from material and energy flows. Despite some evidence of relative decoupling where global GDP has risen faster than carbon dioxide emissions, absolute decoupling (absolute decline in resource use during phases of economic growth) is not happening (Asara et al., 2015). In ecological economics degrowth is described as an "equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term" (Schneider et al., 2010: 513). However, degrowth is not just about producing or consuming less but also involves a repoliticization of the economy and a radical break from conventional economic thinking because growth economies and societies do not know how to degrow (Fournier, 2008; Latouche, 2004). It should come as no surprise that there is political opposition to degrowth because in mainstream economics degrowth is equivalent to recession and depression arising from GDP contraction. Degrowth distinguishes wellbeing and prosperity from economic growth and aims to promote economic democracy and social justice and a "concern for a fair distribution (intergenerational and intragenerational) of economic, social and environmental goods and bads at all time-lines" (Demaria et al., 2013: 202). Degrowth is not the same as austerity, which is a neoliberal project imposed on societies during times of recession to protect growth (Chertkovskaya et al., 2017).

Imagining a society without growth poses a formidable challenge, yet there are alternative ways of organizing productive activities in a postgrowth economy that make a positive contribution to flourishing, provide decent livelihoods, and use low energy and material throughput, activities that create "prosperity without growth" (Jackson, 2009). Conventional economic wisdom tells us that resisting growth leads to poverty and economic and social collapse, while ecological understandings posit ecosystems collapse in the pursuit of unbridled economic growth. It is important to challenge economically driven assumptions that imply that abandoning economic growth inevitably means living in a world of poverty, insufficient healthcare and low quality education (which arguably reflects the current situation of the world despite the mantra of economic growth). As mentioned earlier GDP is not a valid indicator of the happiness or wellbeing of a country's citizens and numerous studies have shown that life satisfaction does not keep growing beyond certain levels of income (e.g. Proto and Rustichini, 2013).

Even some critics of the growth model, however, do not see moving away from growth as a viable solution and argue that we need a different kind of growth for the transition to a green economy. For example, Pollin (2018) argues that degrowth per se in the form of global GDP contraction will not lead to climate stabilization in terms of the extent of emissions reduction that is needed. Some sectors of economic activity—clean energy for example—need to be prioritized for rapid and substantial growth while the fossil fuel sector needs a similar scale and scope of contraction. Similarly, education and health services need to grow. Thus, a post-growth society requires "selective degrowth" where policy decisions are made democratically about which sectors of the economy need to degrow and which ones need to expand (Kallis, 2011; Latouche, 2009).

Global economic contraction, as we have seen during the pandemic, will also lead to massive job losses and increased hardship for the poor and there are no policies in place to deal with long-term mass unemployment. However, the COVID-19 induced economic contraction was involuntary and not a deliberative plan that emerged out of a genuine, wide-scale democratic process so it would be unfair to claim that a planned transition to degrowth would have the same inequitable effects. The response of governments to the dramatic economic slowdown caused by the pandemic is interesting: "normal" recession periods generally involve cuts to public spending but the opposite has happened in response to COVID-19 where we have seen unprecedented levels of public spending, which is the outcome of political actions rather than economic facts (Seaton, 2020). A transition to a post-growth economy is ultimately a political decision requiring particular policy choices that favor societal wellbeing over endless GDP expansion.

Principles of degrowth thinking

To move in that direction, we gleaned some key principles of degrowth from the literature in ecological economics, sociology and political ecology that can be helpful. For example the notion of *frugal abundance* is understood not as hardship or austerity but as collective sufficiency whereby production is organized to ensure that all basic needs like food, clothing, housing and health are met equitably (Liegey and Nelson, 2020). Collective sufficiency implies that degrowth economies should aim to meet the basic needs of every human being. Importantly, while people experience abundance through collective sufficiency in part due to basic need fulfilment, abundance also entails eudemonic (as opposed to hedonic) happiness and subjective wellbeing that result from fulfilling non-material life goals (D'Alisa et al., 2015. People anchor these forms of fulfilment, for example, in enriched social relationships and the pursuit of the good life with fewer goods. Deliberate frugality is a key principle of degrowth enabled by reducing material inequalities, opening possibilities for broader experiences of abundance.

Conviviality is another key principle of degrowth, drawing from Illich's (1973) work on convivial technologies. Conviviality is the opposite of industrial productivity, which Illich (1973: 7) argues has breached the "counter-productivity threshold," and focuses instead on the social benefits of technologies that can serve the common good. For Illich, unlike industrial technologies that promote market dependence and are inherently destructive and narrowly purposed, convivial tools (e.g. bicycle) can be easily adapted to many different purposes chosen by individuals and can promote ecosocial wellbeing (cf. D'Alisa et al., 2015).

For many degrowth scholars, *care* is the hallmark of a healthy society. Social practices that promote daily wellbeing in families, friendships, neighborhoods, communities and nations are essential building blocks for constructing a viable post-growth world but are presently the most taken-for-granted and economically undervalued aspects of societies. Since women provide so much of the care given and since care giving usually falls in the category of "unpaid work," ecofeminist scholars have argued that we must replace the current growth paradigm, both because it perpetuates existing gender injustices and because it hierarchically arranges destructive industrial activities above care giving (Dengler and Strunk, 2018). Emerging theoretical perspectives on degrowth problematize the hierarchy that elevates paid work done by men often at the expense of environmental considerations above care giving and sets the stage for post growth thinking that embraces a vision of equality in care (D'Alisa et al., 2015).

Degrowth economies also call for *relocalization* of economic activities that involve localized production and distribution, short supply chains, and knowledge and skill sharing in order to reduce our ecological footprint (Liegey and Nelson, 2020). As part of the movement toward voluntary simplicity, eco-communities and sufficiency economies, local thinking aims to transform macroeconomic structures firstly by escaping the system and secondly by radically transforming it horizontally, as local experiments replicate and scale (D'Alisa et al., 2015). In relocalization, citizens place heavy emphasis on reducing global consumerism, using less commercial energy, celebrating customized autonomous exchange, and building meaningful lives while abiding by, for example, Aldo Leopold's land ethic.

Principles of degrowth aim to deliver quality rather than quantity, the latter being the focus of economic growth. Other radical concepts related to degrowth include democratic decision making, autonomy, production for use, voluntary rather than wage labor, gifts/barter rather than profit sharing, sharing, the commons, and experimental forms of collaborative living (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Fournier, 2008).

The emphasis is not on "less" but "different": "different activities, different forms and uses of energy, different relations, different gender roles, different allocations of time between paid and non-paid work and different relations with the non-human world" (D'Alisa et al., 2015: 4). Given the extent to which growth defines concepts of economic wellbeing, any policy shift towards a degrowth agenda will be difficult to achieve. For organizations, imagining a post-growth scenario becomes even more challenging as we will see in the next section.

Imagining post-growth organizations

The organizations that an economy comprises tend to reflect the governing hegemonic superstructure aimed at reproducing that economy. For post-growth organizing to take hold, organizations must respect the ecological limits that constrain the economy and other principles consistent with post-growth thought. One of the main goals of this Special Issue is to explore linkages between growth imaginaries at the macro and micro levels. Theorizing post-growth imaginaries at the macroeconomic level is difficult but the problems are compounded when we try to translate degrowth and other post-growth concepts and principles to the organizational level, especially for large, publicly listed corporations. To elaborate, while multinational corporations, for example, have become adept at translating environmental and social sustainability goals into business opportunities, most managers and policy makers assume that high levels of economic growth will lead to sustainable (and profitable) outcomes. Consider the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, launched in 1999, which assesses company performance on sustainability criteria and defines a sustainable corporation as "one that aims at increasing long-term shareholder value by integrating economic, environmental and social growth opportunities into its corporate and business strategies" (Banerjee, 2011: 721). Correspondingly, when Larry Fink (CEO of BlackRock) announces to his company's shareholders that BlackRock is "on the edge of a fundamental reshaping of finance and will make sustainability its new standard for investing" (BlackRock, 2020) or when Paul Polman (former CEO of Unilever) declares "creating shareholder value is not the same as maximizing short-term profits," (Polman, 2017) economic growth still remains the dominant ideology for companies.

There is a similar discrepancy in mainstream OMS research (and teaching) that reinforces the idea that corporations need to keep growing without regard to planetary boundaries or socio-ecological system needs (Ergene et al., 2020; Nyberg and Wright, 2020). This discrepancy is not limited to research. Scholars have noted for some time that business schools are educating the next generation of business leaders to endorse a strategy of growth at all costs. Ghoshal (2005) framed this pedagogy as the "Chicago agenda," arguing that students are uniformly encouraged to think in ways that are ideologically attuned to Milton Friedman's philosophy of [neo]liberalism and its unique formula for promoting rapid economic growth regardless of social and environmental consequences. In addition to reinforcing ideological assertions about the advantages of radical individualism and deregulated capitalism, this approach focuses on theories that reflect these assumptions (e.g. agency theory, transaction cost economics, game theory) and models of stewardship that marginalize or exclude ethical considerations. Recent research and commentary on management education underscore the pervasiveness of these biases (Parker, 2018). Given the climate emergency we face, the directive to "grow or die" (that is not difficult to deduce from our research and teaching) can also mean "grow and die."

Imagining post-growth organizations involves identifying ways to create value that do not depend on traditional forms of growth. In line with this, the first step for organizations in their path towards degrowth is understanding and embracing growth independence. This could be inspired by Latouche's (2009: viii) "virtuous cycle of serene, convivial and sustainable contraction" whereby organizations are challenged to "re-evaluate, reconceptualize, restructure, redistribute, relocalize, reduce, re-use and recycle." It should come as no surprise that emerging research on how organizations grapple with the growth dilemma has generally focused on alternate organizations like eco-communities, cooperatives, urban gardens, social enterprises, credit unions, fair trade organizations, and community farming that prioritize ecological sustainability and wellbeing rather than economic growth (Khmara and Kronenberg, 2018; Paulson, 2017, Roman-Alcalá, 2017). For these organizations, economic growth is subordinate to collective forms of ownership, democratic decision-making, integrating ecological principles into business practices, reducing energy consumption, localization, and redistributing wealth (Rätzer and Winkler, 2018; Wiefek and Heinitz, 2018). Post-growth organizations attempt to create value that is unrelated to growth.

Alternative forms of ownership or democratic organizational structures do not necessarily entail a degrowth agenda. The Mondragon business model, for example, which has a worker-owned cooperative structure based on values of participatory management, labor solidarity, and social transformation (Cheney et al., 2014) may mark a departure from conventional organizational and ownership structures but it still plays by the rules of a growth economy. The company's 2019 annual report states that its "overall business trend was positive, in step with the growth dynamics of recent years" and identifies several challenges facing the company including "reorganisation of activities with less potential for growth" (Mondragon, 2020). Other "alternative" companies like Patagonia, despite their strong record on environmental and social issues and democratic governance, also are probably better described as steady-state or slow-growth rather than degrowth firms (Khmara and Kronenberg, 2018).

Studying how small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) deal with growth can also shed insights into future organizing consistent with post-growth principles. A recent study of European SMEs found that only 2% of sampled SMEs were focused on strong growth and over 25% did not set explicit growth targets (Gebauer, 2018). These findings do not imply that SMEs are explicitly critical of growth or that they embrace the post-growth agenda of wellbeing, social justice and ecological restoration. Resource constraints may very well prevent SMEs from following a growth strategy even if they desire this. Nevertheless, understanding how SMEs and entrepreneurs manage non-growing companies may yield valuable insights on the organizational processes that enable companies to create value without growing, perhaps pointing the way to growth independence and organizational transition to degrowth.

For decades, mainstream OMS scholars have tended to equate effective management with growth of the enterprise, most notably beginning with the classics that launched the field of strategy (e.g. Penrose, 1959). There is no more dominant, taken-for-granted system of beliefs circulating among OMS scholars than the one articulating (or quietly underpinning) the economic growth imperative. Models of post-growth organizations are emerging but to be influential for theory development and policy formulation they must align with the principles of degrowth while also leveraging (in a counter-hegemonic way) against the structures of capitalist exploitation, patriarchal domination, postcolonial oppression and other dysfunctions intertwined with economic growthmania. This is by no means an easy task and this special issue is an early attempt to grapple with the conceptual (and empirical) challenges posed by the degrowth paradigm. We now turn to the articles we feature in the Special Issue.

The articles

In this Special Issue we have attempted to mobilize theoretical resources in OMS and related fields that harness the critiques of growth literature and generate new connections with degrowth imaginaries. The first article we feature, by Vandeventer and Lloveras, explores how an unfamiliar, abstract and challenging concept like degrowth is enacted in OMS research. Drawing on theoretical insights from science and technology studies, the authors describe the multiple ontologies of degrowth as a boundary object, deployed to fit the needs of different users while maintaining a common meaning. Analyzing how the concept of degrowth is enacted in the management literature, the authors identify three practices: stabilization of particular understandings of degrowth, reconfigurations of the degrowth concept for specific audiences, and projection that involves mapping concepts between degrowth and OMS. Interestingly, while degrowth can operate usefully as a boundary object in the field, the authors caution against the dilution of degrowth's radical potential as its use expands in the relevant research communities.

The second article, by Pansera and Fressoli, problematizes the role of technological innovation in a post-growth era. It is often argued by business leaders, economists and other Panglossian thinkers that technology will enable humanity to innovate itself out of the climate emergency. The authors describe how theories of technology are often misleading when it comes to explaining deterministic impacts on society and presupposed progress. They also show how particular conceptualizations of technological innovation normalize growth without questioning the latter's problematic aspects. The authors explore the potential to decouple technological innovation from growth by discussing some modes of organizing that can realign innovation for postgrowth organizations.

The third article, by Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, uses Marxist theory in characterizing growth as violence—against humans and against nature. Climate change in particular, they argue, should be seen as a form of "slow corporate violence" that can render the planet uninhabitable if it continues unabated. The authors contend that in capitalist modes of production so called productive forces like natural resources, labor, technology and money inevitably produce destructive effects along with whatever benefits might arise. Drawing on theoretical concepts from ecosocialism and degrowth, the authors explain how the exploitation of labor and unequal ecological exchange can destroy the social metabolism between nature and society. They theorize that in a political economic system based on degrowth principles, natural resources will not be put to destructive use but reimagined as ecosystems that can support a regenerative metabolism. The authors add a precautionary note in advocating a transition to a post-growth society: if degrowth is to mark a truly regenerative shift it must be equitable and not reproduce the inequities and violence of growth.

Perhaps COVID-19 may provide the impetus for such a regenerative shift. A recent poll in the United Kingdom found that more than 8 in 10 people wanted the government to prioritize health and wellbeing over economic growth during the coronavirus crisis. More than 6 in 10 felt that the government should prioritize improved social and environmental outcomes ahead of GDP after the pandemic has subsided, although nearly a third would prioritize the economy instead at that point (Youel, 2020). For this to happen, socially essential institutions like the welfare state, healthcare, education, and environmental protection need to be reformed so that they are independent of perturbations in GDP growth. Envisioning alternate realities and escaping the tyranny of growth and accumulation requires reimagining our economic, ecological and social relations. This is fundamentally a political task and in our concluding sections we outline a new political economy that is required for a degrowth social imaginary and discuss directions for future research.

Toward a new political economy: Imagining redistribution, restoration, cooperation and sufficiency

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the world more aware that human health is dependent not just on medical institutions but on healthy ecological and social systems. The crisis has also exposed the brutal reality faced by "essential workers" who have perished in record numbers to keep economies afloat. Initiatives such as universal basic income, routinely tabled and forgotten at policy meetings, are now back on the agenda. After decades of romance with *laissez-faire* economics, the state has assumed a more prominent role in regulating the economy. Many small businesses were driven to the wall by extreme economic dislocation, while others found inventive ways not only to survive but also to flourish. Some maintained employment and managed to support families and their communities. Can we use these seeds of solidarity to create better ways of organizing? What if we were to redesign an economy that is guided by human wellbeing and prosperity within ecological boundaries (Jackson, 2009)? An economy that merges community wellbeing and individual subjective wellbeing with the aim of "being well together" (Atkinson et al., 2020: 1903)? We offer some alternative visions of *what* such an economy could look like, while acknowledging that *how* this is to be achieved on multiple scales remains a profound challenge for society and for theorists. We call for abandoning an economy based on accumulation in favor of embracing distribution, creating an economy of restoration rather than extraction, managing a shift from ideals of competition to ideals of cooperation, and from consumerism to values based on sufficiency.

From accumulation to distribution

Capitalism, markets and their associated corporate forms of organizing are powerful engines of accumulation but cannot address (and may even exacerbate) problems of inequality and disproportionate access to resources. Accumulation in many cases involves dispossession of communities where wealth is created for the few at the expense of the many (Harvey, 2003). For some time, accumulation and consumption in affluent societies have not been matters primarily of needs or even appetite, but increasingly markers for status which extends their limits almost without end. The consequences for growth and demands on the environment are obvious. The shift to a post-growth society will require us to recover the sense that our collective wellbeing is not just defined by GDP growth rates but by our capacity and willingness to share our wealth and a recognition that that inequality fundamentally undermines wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

The scale of financial redistribution to deal with the pandemic is unprecedented in human history. In just 9 months, governments have spent more than three times the amount of money to tackle the virus than all the money spent to address the financial crisis of 2008 (IIF, 2020). Climate change, biodiversity and other ecological emergencies need a similar scale of redistribution of wealth. This reorientation, with its reduction of the individualism that drives accumulation and consumption as symbols of status, will contribute to a post-growth society by reducing demand. At the same time, it supports a distributive arrangement that shrinks inequality and thus improves societal health. While advocates for growth claim that "growth is a substitute for redistribution," in a post-growth society, a system of genuine redistribution can become a substitute for growth (Hickel, 2017).

From extraction to restoration

The world's economies are primarily based on extraction (and use) of non-renewable natural resources, which is the largest source of ecological degradation. Apart from oil and gas, mining and metals extraction form the basis of our material life. A post-growth society requires dematerialization of the economy as it directly correlates to patterns of consumption and their associated processes of production, resource extraction and end-of-life disposal needed to maintain our desired standards of living. Achieving the required level of dematerialization to stop ecological harm will radically alter our economic systems at macro and micro levels. It will mean that the current pattern of consumption will no longer define lifestyles, work practices and the broader culture. This transformation in patterns of consumption needs to change from those supporting extraction to those supporting regeneration and cannot be achieved without substantial dematerialization of the world's industrialized economies.

However, much of the environmental and social costs of extraction are kept out of sight while governments continue to subsidize the fossil fuel economy and their associated industrial sectors. The vast majority of the COVID-19 stimulus money announced by governments has gone to powerful fossil fuel industries: more than half a trillion dollars worldwide is to be given away to high-carbon industries, with no conditions to ensure they reduce their carbon output. The European Central Bank has given €220bn to 38 fossil fuel extractive companies including Shell and Total, and several coal companies. Last year 77 countries gave away $478bn of government subsidies to the production and consumption of fossil fuels (Harvey, 2020).

We live in a world in which an oil disaster on land or in the oceans or destroying forests is, by the perverse measures in common use, economically rewarding and politically advantageous for elites. We live a world in which a dead tree is worth more than a living one. Growing your own vegetables or taking care of an aged relative, however, are considered by conventional measures to be unproductive and economically worthless activities. In the UK during the height of the pandemic, the National Health Service issued an initial call for 30,000 volunteers. More than half a million volunteers signed up in less than 24 hours, with numbers exceeding a million over the next few days. Could we imagine a society and economy where volunteering to help people is a productive activity that increases the wealth of a society by enhancing its wellbeing? Where restoring forests is seen as being more beneficial than destroying them?

From competition to cooperation

There is good evidence to show that sometime in the last two million years, human beings took an evolutionary jump in the direction of cooperating and distributing wellbeing well beyond kin, in relatively large communities, and thus favored the accumulation of things in communities that benefitted sharing rather than individual consumption (Boyd and Richerson, 2009). While the community benefits that accrued relied on the cumulative effect of individual efforts, those efforts and their benefits were not framed in individual terms. They were located in a sense of membership in something bigger, where both effort and outcomes were shared, and in values that are reflected in many community based enterprises (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006). Cooperation was a fundamental taken-for-granted value but was replaced by competition in modern economic life as the value that purportedly generates wellbeing. Notwithstanding the positive effects of an economy based on competition, endless competition creates destructive environmental impacts and also fuels inequality and conflict (Krupp and Cook, 2018).

The pandemic has also seen shifts in corporate competitive behavior in some cases. When COVID-19 related hospitals and deaths were at record levels earlier this year, seven teams from

Formula 1 racing, a fiercely competitive field notoriously secretive about its technologies, shared their technologies and cooperated to manufacture ventilators. Imagine if powerful multinational companies or even smaller regional companies started doing the same? What kind of economy would emerge where companies share technology and resources to address environmental and social problems?

From consumerism to sufficiency

The lockdowns due to COVID-19 brought a significant reduction in demand for many goods and services (Guerrieri et al., 2020; Rio-Chanona et al., 2020) as well as a decline in spending on corporate advertising (World Economic Forum, 2020). Extended lockdowns created a kind of existential crisis that forced many to reflect and reevaluate their relationships: relationships with people, with animals and nature, with the spiritual world, compared with what can be experienced in relation to material objects. Many discovered the joy of being in natural and public spaces, cultivating vegetable gardens at home, exchanging products and sharing collective knowledge necessary to make things themselves (Walljasper and Polansek, 2020). While COVID-19 has shifted consumer behavior, it remains to be seen if there is a permanent decline in mindless consumerism, one of the hallmarks of the growth model.

The detrimental material impact of consumerism is increasingly felt in two ways: the extraction of resources from nature needed to create goods; and the disposal of those goods when they have reached their end of life. The key issue here is that the ecological systems on which our economies depend, have finite limits, for both the provision of resources that humanity needs and the capacity to absorb and transform waste back into useful ecological resources. Governments and communities can play an important role by creating and empowering organizations that de-emphasize consumerism. Such organizations would focus on meeting needs rather than selling stuff. They would manage assets for the purpose of delivering long-term wellbeing to asset owners, rather than delivering short-term financial returns to managers (Dietz and O’Neil, 2013). A collective and activist consumer culture that is based on sharing, reusing, repairing, regeneration and recycling can pose a challenge to the planned obsolescence strategy of manufacturers, perhaps forcing them to cater to shifts in consumer demands and preferences.

It is also important to point out that critiques of growth that emerged in mainly European and North American contexts are also closely related to critiques of development and grassroots movements in Latin America and Asia that emerged in the 1990s. Advocates of “post-development” called for alternatives to neoliberal modes of development and for moves to decenter development as a central discourse that imposed reality for Africa, Asia and Latin America (Escobar, 2015; Esteva et al., 2013; Shiva, 2005). In particular the notion of *Buen Vivir* (good life or collective wellbeing) gained considerable currency in Latin America (Gudynas, 2011; Kothari et al., 2014; Peredo, 2019). Emerging from Indigenous struggles against development projects in Latin America, *Buen Vivir* represents a “holistic, de-economized view of social life, constituting an alternative to development” that reflects Indigenous ontologies which makes possible “the subordination of economic objectives to ecological criteria, human dignity, and social justice” (Escobar, 2015: 455). *Buen Vivir* and degrowth have been described as “fellow travelers” in search for socio-ecological transformations with some commonalities and differences. While some proponents of steady-state and degrowth argue that the global North needs to degrow to allow the global South to “develop” (e.g. Daly, 1991; Jackson, 2009) others argue against this form of “catch up development.” They caution against endorsing growth as a basis for improving social and economic welfare in poor countries and advocate the idea that “growth and the economy should be subordinated to *Buen Vivir* and the rights of nature, not the other way around” (Escobar, 2015: 456). The challenge whether in the global North or South is the same: how to make degrowth socially sustainable and politically feasible? The challenge for OMS scholars is to translate degrowth principles into the organizational context. This translation goes beyond studying alternate organizational forms or structures of governance because it focuses first on how organizations can learn to degrow. In our concluding section we offer some thoughts on a future research agenda for post-growth organizations and institutions.

Planetary crises and post-growth organizing: A research agenda

Our aim for this Special Issue is to disturb the relative calm in the field of OMS, which in the main appears disinterested in earnestly addressing global warming and related threats of planetary devastation –a field that has become "climate proofed" as Nyberg and Wright (2020) describe it. We call for a more assertive and uncompromising research agenda to address planetary crises. We think this is necessary if we want our field to offer deeper insights when it comes to environmental crisis points (and inter-related societal problems) as well as post-growth organizing in line with a new political economy centered on redistribution, restoration, cooperation and sufficiency.

A first step would be to interrogate the silences and absences of theorization about growth in OMS. While critiques of economic growth and the search for alternatives are well established in other fields, research in OMS shows little sign of acknowledging the problem of growth, let alone advocating alternative visions. Ecological economics, for example, challenges the orthodoxy of mainstream economics by focusing on human wellbeing, strong sustainability, and economic and ecological justice. Sustainability research in OMS on the other hand is more about corporate sustainability and making a business case for sustainability rather than an ecological case for business (Ergene et al., 2020). There is a need to understand the taken-for-granted assumptions in OMS theories that normalize and reinforce growth. Which theories of organization and organizing are complicit in at least tacitly endorsing growth at all costs while ignoring its negative outcomes? What assumptions about growth underpin the wide acceptance of organizational performance criteria such as sales revenue, shareholder value, or return on assets? The scenario depicting business as usual in terms of economic growth needs to be replaced or at least counterbalanced with one depicting business as usual in terms of ecological disaster.

Second, the degrowth movement, degrowth economics, and social science research focused on degrowth offer OMS scholars an opportunity to reflect on the field's paradigmatic orientations towards the environment, as was more typical in previous decades. While degrowth thinking and research have been criticized for targeting the abstract concept of economic growth rather than the concrete reality of capital accumulation or some more traditional category of radical analysis (see Foster, 2011), we see potential in the degrowth paradigm to support new scholarly alliances among critical theorists and to help generate alternative critical perspectives on organizations. The Special Issue authors illustrate this potential in making provocative connections with Actor-Network theory and Science and Technology Studies (Vandeventer & Lloveras), Marxist theory and ecosocialist futures (Chertkovskaya & Paulsson), and theoretical interpretations of appropriate technology and convivial innovation (Pansera). If what is needed is integrated theory that reflects a "co-revolutionary movement" bringing together the traditional working class critique of capital, the critiques of imperialism, patriarchy, racism and colonialism, along with the critique of ecologically destructive growth (Harvey, 2002 as cited in Foster, 2011), clearly the degrowth paradigm must play at least a complementary role.

Third, we need more theory building that articulates post-growth possibilities at the organizational level. What ethical theories of the firm are needed that can explain and justify an organization's existence based on its ability to contribute to societal wellbeing and ecological restoration rather than based on its ability to contribute to economic growth? What business models can researchers make compatible with post-growth scenarios? If dematerialization of economies is a key step in the transition to post-growth, what are the limits of dematerialization for organizations?

Fourth, there is a need to understand the institutional arrangements that can facilitate a transition to degrowth, in particular the role of the state and civil society in creating institutional change. While most existing institutions are not likely to support degrowth policies, they will still have to play a part in building post-growth economies through a process of institutional change and reform. Civil society actors play a key role in institutional transition and more research is needed to understand the tensions between bottom-up initiatives by activists calling for radical institutional change and resistance by institutional actors who want to maintain the status quo (Joutsenvirta, 2016). It is apparent that business and markets will not voluntarily support degrowth initiatives so democratic states will need to play the crucial role in accelerating the transition to post-growth. Corporate social responsibility initiatives will not keep the oil or coal in the ground—strong and enforceable regulation is needed for that to happen. While governments around the world are incentivizing investments in renewable energy they also subsidize fossil fuel companies—according to a recent IMF report global energy subsidies for fossil fuels amounted to \$5.2 trillion in 2019, about 6.5% of global GDP (Coady et al., 2019). These institutional arrangements need to be challenged and reformed if policy makers are serious about ecological restoration.

The global economic contraction forced by COVID-19 has shown that the world's economies are defined more by employment than by interest rates, fiscal policy, oil price fluctuations, demand or supply factors, or technological innovations (Meadway, 2020). Since the pandemic poses a grave threat to the labor market and since the status and quality of employment are so central to perceived quality of life, many people seem to be rethinking all aspects of their lives. This interlude of uncertain duration is extracting a toll but it may ultimately provide citizens with a welcome ramp off the treadmill of production and consumption. Perhaps the existential crisis created by COVID-19 can enable deeper reflection on the real meaning of employment and labor markets in a post-growth world, not just as jobs but in relation to the meaning of work itself. Perhaps it will facilitate questions about what work and how much work is necessary to lead an enriching life, about what goods and services are essential for a regenerative world, and how we organize society around the provision of these precious goods and services? Otherwise, there is a real danger that our obeisance to growth will become what Lear (2008) calls the "blind spot" of any culture: the inability to conceive of its own destruction.

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Note

1. In this paper we use the terms degrowth and post-growth interchangeably, though some scholars see them as separate but related concepts where degrowth is seen as a subset of post- growth (see Drews and Antal, 2016).

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